

THE MARONITE EREMITICAL TRADITION: A CONTEMPORARY REVIVAL

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It is not easy to write about the life of people who have rightly chosen silence, and to mention them when they do not want to leave their names to posterity having decided to remain unknown, erased from people's memories. To meet the Maronite hermits requires following a long procedure; informing the Secretariat of the Maronite Lebanese Order, receiving permission from the Superior of the monastery to which the hermitage belongs, and finally getting the necessary consent of the hermit who has rightly chosen silence in order not to disrupt his or her quest for humility.¹

In this study we intend to look at the eremitical experience as lived within the Maronite Church. There are four hermits in the contemporary Maronite Church, three monks and one nun. There is a programme to introduce lay people to the eremitical tradition of the Maronite Church through the holding of 'Eremitical Days' organized and led by the Antonine Sisters. Finally, a group of Latin rite American monks who adopted the Maronite tradition, attracted by the eremitical spirituality of Saint Charbel.²

Reflection on eremitical spirituality in the Maronite Church turns out to be a very delicate and difficult issue especially in the absence of written texts and other information which might facilitate the study of this school of spirituality rooted in history and revealed through the actual experience of the Maronite Church. Yet the monastic and eremitical life is at the origins of the Maronite Church in the person of its patron Saint Maron (Maroun)³ who was 'an anchorite saint . . . living in the 4th and 5th century on a mountain situated, in all probability, in the region of Apamea in Syria Secunda'.⁴

St Maron led 'in the open air near a temple for the pagans which he converted to a Church, a life of penitence and prayer'.⁵ This way of life attracted a group to become his disciples. Gathered around him they formed the nucleus of the Maronite Church, their life centered on the monastery dedicated to the memory of their master, namely the monastery of Saint Maron situated in the vicinity of Apamea.⁶ The fact

that it had these origins has 'conditioned and guided the life of the Maronite community. A unique fact in Christian history is that a monastic community has become the principal organizer of a Church, giving birth to a Patriarchate which has been granted by tradition the prestigious title of Antioch'.⁷ This double historic reality that of Saint Maron and the monastic grouping of his disciples, determines the eremitical spirituality of the Maronite Church. This spirituality and way of life characterizes the Maronite Church and its believers who appreciate the ascetic life of its founders.⁸

Understanding the eremitical life in the contemporary Maronite Church cannot happen without a precise analysis of its origins and of its historical evolution. These reveal a subtle mixture of tradition and adaptation. The eremitical life in the Maronite Church is comparable to a cell in the human body: it constitutes all the essence of its life, of its origins, of its spirituality and it reflects its identity. As identity evolves in history, so the eremitical life represents nowadays not only the contemporary identity of the Maronite Church, but also the consequences of the transformations experienced over time: confusion and ambivalence. In other words, the analysis of the evolution of the eremitical life rightly takes into consideration the itinerary of a Church and of a people, the Maronites.

MARONITE SPIRITUALITY

The Maronite Church belongs to the family of Antiochian Syriac Churches and has forged its own spirituality within Syriac spirituality.⁹ The spirituality of these Syriac Churches is rooted on the one hand in waiting for the return of Christ, described by Michel Hayek as a 'purgatorial state',¹⁰ and on the other hand in that meditation on the Scriptures which is the basis for all their liturgical traditions.

This spirituality is based on pneumatic mysticism which is developed in three stages, following three levels corporal, psychological and pneumatic.¹¹ Maronite spirituality, in spite of being affiliated to Syriac spirituality and a successor to it, has distinguished itself from the latter through the specificity of some of its elements acquired throughout its history. Through its attachment to the land, this spirituality proves to be profoundly human. In its understanding of the church it is ecumenically open. It is the spirituality of the suffering, martyred, crucified and risen Christ, a spirituality waiting for his second coming. Finally, it is a spirituality which, in spite of giving birth to a Church, has remained faithful to its monastic character.

The attachment of Maronites to Lebanon shows their attachment to the sacred character of the land. Settling in the North Lebanon has become a vocation. Making a refuge out of these mountains and settling

in the deep and steep Valley of Qadisha, the Maronites were able to conserve 'what they received and make it productive. Here lies their originality; here could be the testimony which they are to give in the ecumenical chorus'.¹²

Lebanon has the character of a promised land which offers nothing to the Maronites but 'summits, deserts and wild valleys', a country which is 'incessantly contested and periodically abandoned for the sake of a new exodus. Would it be able, as St Maron did when he transformed a pagan temple to a sanctuary in a mountain near Cyrhus, to transform the prominent places in Lebanon of Phoenician mythology into oratories and hermitages?'¹³ The close, sacred relationship formed between the land of Lebanon and the Maronites, transformed the land of refuge into a patriarchal see of the Catholic Church. From then on, the patriarch has become the symbol of their unity since all Maronite groupings of the diaspora claim his ecclesiastic authority. Michel Hayek correctly noted that 'the Maronite worked, constructed, planted as we celebrate a liturgy: all this had a sacramental taste, a liturgical flavour: the vine and the wheat for the bread and the wine of the Eucharist, the olive tree for refining the holy oils, the mulberry tree for weaving altar cloth and wedding gowns. Everything is a sign of the great beyond'.¹⁴

Maronite spirituality has an ecumenical character, a spiritual universalism stemming from its belonging to the universal Catholic Church. What distinguishes the Maronite Church from other Syriac Churches is its union with the See of Rome.¹⁵ The Maronite church is also unique among Eastern Christianity in not having an 'Orthodox' branch – all Maronites are in union with Rome. Their universalism has also been manifested through their favouring a dialogue with the Arab-Muslim world.

The cross is at the centre of Maronite spirituality. It 'is fused with the person of Jesus Christ who died and who was raised from death. It is just like him, powerful, victorious, glorious, a source of light, provider of life and source of immortality'.¹⁶ This vision of the crucified Christ comes as a great consolation to Maronites because it allows them to understand and internalize the persecutions which they endured and which they consider as sufferings joined to those of Jesus on the Cross. But this is not everything, since the Maronites, in joining their sufferings to those of Jesus on the Cross, find in this all their hope for victory and glory. It is the Cross itself that allows them to give a meaning to their suffering, transforming their weakness into strength, their persecution into victory and their death into Resurrection.

THE EREMITICAL TRADITION IN THE MARONITE CHURCH

The Syriac hermit tradition is the work of individuals who chose to live in solitude and not the result or outcome of coenobitic life. On the contrary,

the numerous disciples eager for this life in solitude, were the ones who very early on urged their masters to organize a coenobitic structure.¹⁷ The eremitical tradition in the Maronite Church that begins with the Syriac Fathers takes a particular form with Saint Maron, who himself decided to live in solitude.¹⁸ This way of life was, however, subject to changes throughout history, particularly with the Muslim conquests, and also as a consequence of monastic reform at the end of the seventeenth century.

Several disciples led the same life as that of Saint Maron and came to be called 'the group of Beit-Maroun'.¹⁹ From the beginning several different terms were used for hermits in the Maronite tradition. First of all, in the times of Aphraat and Saint Ephrem, the term 'ihidoyô' which means the single ascetic and also the hermit isolated from the people, was employed. Other Syriac terms are used to indicate 'solitaries' such as 'nûkrîti' or anchorites, 'modebroyé' or hermits, 'bîlê' or weepers.²⁰ There is also 'hbîsê' or recluse from the verb 'hbas' which means to imprison in, to retreat or to withdraw to a solitary place. The substantive is 'hîbsô' describes the solitary who withdraws to and imprisons himself in a hermitage or in an isolated place in the desert for the love of God, 'Estûnôyô' or Stylite, 'ônwôyô' or ascetic . . .²¹ The Maronite tradition has kept, to indicate the solitary or solitaries who lived in the heart of the Maronite Church, the term 'hbîsê', which corresponds to the term 'hermit.' This term applied to Maronite hermits should not be taken in the strict sense of recluse. By 'hîbsô', we do not mean to say the recluse who avoids people but the hermit who leads a way of life which allows him to carry out a mission'.²² The choice of this term reflects the socio-political condition of the Maronites: persecuted by their co-religionists and by the new conquerors, they withdrew to Lebanon and especially to Qadisha. This feeling of uncertainty which threatens faith, calls upon the sacrificial martyr to protect the faith of the community. Thus, the hermit offers himself as a sacrifice on the Lord's altar to save the community.

The Church from its beginnings has passed from the stage of 'the red martyr' to the stage of 'the white martyr', the Maronite hermit retreated to Qadisha holds concurrently both attributes. He is the red martyr because of his imposed seclusion by the conqueror. However, defending the faith of all the community leads him equally to be a martyr; the will to become a hermit makes of him in this case a white martyr.

Moreover, the hermit becomes for Maronites the foundation for the relationship between God and his people. He helps to maintain two kinds of relationships in his spiritual life; a vertical relationship, which, as a white martyr, makes him lead his community to God through his prayer, and a horizontal relationship, because he is sacrificing himself for the sake of his community. In this sense, the Maronite hermit imitates Christ and transforms the Eucharist to a daily living: He is sacrificing himself on the Cross to save his community, and to redeem it by taking its sins upon himself. He constitutes himself a meeting point between God and his people.

What strengthens even more the role of the hermit is their continuous presence throughout Maronite history. Douwaihi points out in his annals the existence of several hemits: Peter the hermit in 1228,²³ John of Qnat²⁴ and several others located in the hermitages of the sacred Valley in modern times such as Gabriel of Edhen,²⁵ Yunan al Matriti, Bishop Youssof of Jaj²⁶ Malka al Bukfani,²⁷ the hermit Barakat,²⁸ Bishop Sarkis ar-Rizzi.²⁹ The presence of these hermits in the valley of Qadisha was not limited to autochthonous hermits. There is also the almost continuous presence of foreign hermits from Ethiopia, Jerusalem, Egypt and Europe.

There is, too, a link between the hermitage and ecclesiastical authority in the Maronite Church. For centuries monks were in charge. 'The first patriarchs and bishops were chosen in the monastery of Beth Maroun . . . They are remembered by the monastic hood worn by the bishops, and the name of the patriarchal residence, Qannoubîn from the Greek word Koinobion . . . The patriarch and his bishops are committed to monastic obligations and without taking monastic vows they practice chastity, poverty, obedience, severe asceticism, and they cultivate the land'.³⁰

Many bishops and patriarchs have indeed led the eremitical life and several of them were called to guide their people while they were in their hermitage. There are frequent examples: for instance, three hermits were elevated to the patriarchate: Mkhail ar Rizzi (1567–1581), Sarkis ar Rizzi (1581–1596) and Yussouf ar Rizzi (1596–1608).³¹ Furthermore, bishops led the austere life of a hermit despite the fact they did not live in hermitages. The patriarch, before the synod of Mount-Lebanon in 1736, abstained from eating meat, wore a monk's habit and led an austere life. This highlights the function of responsibility and leadership fulfilled by the hermits, a fundamental reference point for the community. In addition, the austere way of life and the monk's habit remind the Maronite religious authorities, the bishops and patriarchs, of their true identity.

This austere way of life was not only the preserve of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. It was practiced by the believers, the common Maronite people: 'Until the reorganization of the religious life in 1700, being a monk meant nothing more than a stronger radical commitment to the institution which is the community itself. The people lived according to the liturgical calendar and shared austerity with the monks. They fasted a lot, abstained from many things and recited daily hymns and prayers even at midnight when there is always a huge throng of people'.³² Nor was the eremitical life exclusively reserved for monks and hermits. All Maronites led a daily eremitical life in work, prayer, obedience to their Church and devotion to their spiritual authorities. This is why the Maronites are known to be a monastic people.³³ It is around the monasteries that the Maronite Community was formed and reformed. Its diffusion follows the path of the monastic foundations; working the land is its main activity as well as that of the monks.

Everything takes place as if this community is a vast abbey having scattered branches headed by an abbot, who is a patriarch, surrounded by bishops who are assistants while the people form a kind of third order. All are committed to the same evangelic principles with certain attenuations for the laity and an extreme rigour for the hermits.³⁴ This mentality and this popular aspect go back to the early beginnings of tradition. The 'Banat' and 'Banay Quomo' (daughters and sons of the pact) were a secular ascetic movement within the Syriac Church formed by young boys and girls who devoted their virginity and their sexual continence to God as an expression of their struggle against sin.³⁵

MARONITE HERMITS IN TODAY'S CHURCH

A continuous presence of hermits in the Maronite Church constitutes a characteristic of the tradition. However, the second half of the twentieth century has seen a decline in the numbers of hermits and hence an absence of masters and disciples of the eremitical tradition. This has threatened the eremitical tradition itself. There was nonetheless a continuation of the eremitical life in Lebanon. Yaakoub Bou Maroun, a monk of the Maronite Lebanese Order, became a hermit in Tamiche³⁶ on 26 November 1926. Antoun Tarabay, a monk from the Mariamite Order started his hermitage in 1949 in the hermitage of Saint Elisha in the sacred Valley of Qadisha, that is before the death of the Bou Maroun on 17 February 1958.

Tarabay remained in his hermitage until 1983. Struck by hemiplegia which prevented him from staying there, he was transferred to Zouk Mosbeh, where he died in 1998.³⁷ A year before Tarabay left his hermitage, Antonios Chayna, a monk of the Maronite Lebanese Order, was authorized to start living in the hermitage of Saint Boula³⁸ in the Qadisha. This period of stagnation was followed by a certain renaissance: there are now four hermits who live in different Lebanese hermitages: in Qadisha, in Tamiche and in Ayto. In the Qadisha there are four large monasteries to which are joined the hermitages: the Monastery of Qannubi, for a long time a patriarchal residence, the Monastery of Saint Anthony of Kozhaya, the Monastery of our Lady of Hawqa and the Monastery of Saint Elisha.

Antonios Chayna

Father Antonios Chayna³⁹ was born in 1920 in a village called Bqarqacha in Northern Lebanon. On 15 August 1935, he started his monastic life in the Maronite Lebanese Order in Kifan,⁴⁰ at that time the monastery for novices in the Order. He was ordained a priest on 16 July 1952 in Strasbourg in France at the age of 32, that is, seventeen years after he started his monastic life. Apart from the spiritual path he undertook a

long period of study. He studied philosophy and theology at a Jesuit university. He later pursued his studies in general theology in Strasbourg and in moral theology in the Gregorian in Rome. He completed his studies and obtained a doctorate in moral theology. He taught moral theology at the Holy Spirit University in Kaslik-Lebanon from 1957 until he started his hermitage in 1982. He has been successful both as an administrator and as a spiritual guide. He was master of novices in his Order from 1958 until 1968, then the General Assistant of the Order from 1968 until 1974.

Between 1974 and 1977, he occupied several positions, he was at the same time a professor at the Holy Spirit University in Kaslik, taught courses at the seminary of Karm Saddé and was in charge of the general management of Caritas in Lebanon. Between 1977 and 1982, he was Abbot of the Monastery of Saint Anthony Kozhaya, the motherhouse of the Order, a monastery that has always been central to several hermitages in the sacred Valley. On the feast of the Pentecost 1982 Father Chayna decided to give up all responsibilities and become a hermit at Saint Boula, a hermitage under the tutelage of the Monastery of Saint Anthony Kozhaya at an altitude of 1110 meters. The hermitage had been established in 1716 by Father Abdallah Car'ali on the Western side of the Monastery of Saint Anthony Kozhaya to cater for the needs of the monks who sought the life of solitude and silence. Since its establishment hermits have⁴¹ resided there almost continuously.

It should be noted that with the reform of the Maronite Lebanese order on 10 November 1965, during Father Chayna's times as novice master, monastic life changed from a solitary one to coenobitic, while respecting the spirit of the eremitical tradition.

Sister Mary-Jesus Abboud

Sister Mary-Jesus was born in Tlayl (Akkar) in 1941 and baptized on 11 January 1942 in her village. On 13 April 1968 she entered the Monastery of Saint Simon Stylite in Ayto under the guidance of Father Joseph Farah. She took her first vows on 23 July 23 at the same monastery. On 6 October 1974, she took her perpetual vows at the monastery of Saint Joseph in Jrabta. She returned to the Monastery of Saint Simeon Stylite in Ayto in 1975. From that date, she incessantly demonstrated to her superiors her desire to live as a hermit. On 25 July 1993 she started her eremitic life at the hermitage of Saint Simeon Stylite in Ayto.⁴²

The Monastery of Saint Simeon Stylite is in the district of Zghorta in North Lebanon at an altitude of 950 metres. According to tradition, the convent was built from the sixth century onwards on the ruins of a Roman temple, during the period of the expansion of Christianity in Lebanon. In the tenth century the convent sheltered Maronite monks who followed the Rule of Saint Anthony the Great. The Library of the convent has ancient Maronite manuscripts, some of which tell the story of

Saint Anthony. Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries the convent went through a period of decline. At the end of the first half of the nineteenth century, however, it underwent a monastic renewal under the direction of Bishop Paul Moussa who consecrated it to the nuns. The nuns observed the Rule of the Maronite Orders approved by the Holy See in 1732. From 1863 the convent was under the direction of the Maronite Lebanese Order. It is in this convent that Sister Rafqa,⁴³ who in 2001 became Saint Rafqa, stayed between 1871 and 1897, and it is a small hermitage next to this convent that shelters Sister Mary Jesus Abboud.

On 7 August 1984 the Maronite Lebanese order of the nuns was instituted and took charge of the convent.⁴⁴ The spirituality of the nuns is inspired by both oriental and occidental eremitical currents. In the cloister, the nuns lead a life of prayer and contemplation. They pray four times a day and celebrate Mass daily. They recite the offices and rosary and read spiritual books.⁴⁵

The Maronite Lebanese Order decided to change the statutes of the nuns, adding the function of missionaries to their contemplative vocation. In 1991 the Congregation for the Oriental Churches in Rome approved the statutes.

Hermit Yuhanna Khawand

Born on 10 May 1936 in Saydoun, David Khawand was baptized on 7 June the same year. He went to the state primary school of Saydoun then to the Convent of Our Lady of Victory in Ghosta. He did his secondary studies at the scholasticate of the Maronite Lebanese Order in Kaslik, entering the seminary of the Order on 13 October 1947 under the patronage of Father Paul Hatem. On 22 July 1951 he became a novice in the monastery in Ghosta under the direction of Father Simon Awad. He took his first vows on 29 June 1953 and his perpetual vows on 17 January 1958. He was ordained a priest in Rome on 4 December 1964. Father Yuhanna Khawand was engaged in university teaching from 1970 until he entered the hermitage of Tamiche. He taught a general introduction to the Bible, exegesis of the New Testament as well as Greek, Hebrew and Syriac. He made a major contribution to the process of liturgical reform in the contemporary Maronite Church, and participated in the Arabic translation of the Greek New Testament, edited in 1992 by the Pontifical Faculty of the Holy Spirit University in Kaslik.

Before he entered the hermitage in Tamiche, he several times visited the Monastery of Saint Anthony Kozhaya where he experienced solitude, and similarly visited hermit Chayna to benefit from his personal experience. His aspiration to the eremitical life is long-standing; he tells that he was present during the funeral of hermit Yaakoub Bou Maroun in 1958 and held a candle which he blew out and hid in his pocket after the burial. Bou Maroun was the last hermit from the Maronite Lebanese Order before Chayna started his hermitage in 1982. The lack of hermits

within the Maronite Lebanese Order has saddened Father Khawand. The candle itself was lost, but when he started his hermitage in 1999 he felt that the candle was lit again. What had long kept him from taking this step towards eremitical life was a keen sense of responsibility especially towards the Order. Nevertheless, he finally started his hermitage in Tamiche on 17 January 1998.⁴⁶

The Monastery of Our Lady of Tamiche is situated in the Metn district. It was built in 1673 by the bishop of Aleppo, Gabriel el Bouzani to serve as the Episcopal See for the Diocese of Aleppo. In 1704, Bishop Gabriel was appointed Patriarch and his nephew Mikhael el Blouzani was ordained Bishop and his successor in Aleppo. Bishop Mikhael el Blouzani stayed in the Monastery of Our Lady of Tamiche until 1724 when he resigned because of old age. He decided to transfer the property of the monastery to the monks of the Maronite Lebanese Order in 1727.⁴⁷ In 1841, the monastery was burned down by the Egyptian army.⁴⁸ Two hermitages were annexed to the monastery; the first built simultaneously with the monastery. This hermitage is not used nowadays and stands in ruins. But in 1926 the abbot of the Monastery of Tamiche, Father Youssef Saadé el Ghostawi built another hermitage fifteen minutes away by foot from the monastery in a region called 'Ain Kattine' at an altitude of 350 metres. The first hermit who lived in it was Father Jacques Abi Maroun. Hermit Yuhanna Khawand currently occupies this hermitage.⁴⁹

Dario Escobar Montanya Sanchez

He was born on 7 July 1934 in La Estrella-Columbia, a village near Madellín, Columbia in South America, the third of the seven sons of Horacio and Lucila Escobar. He entered the novitiate of the Congregation of Jesus and Mary on 8 February 1955 in Bogotá, the capital of Columbia. There between 1956 and 1963 he pursued university studies in theology, philosophy and pedagogy. He was ordained priest and in 1974 went to the United States to finish his studies, specializing in psychology. He practiced this profession until 1990. His professional experience was centred especially on teaching but also on therapy and spiritual guidance to relationships in crisis. Between 1974 and 1988 he taught theology in different seminaries and diocesan scholasticates of the Congregation in Columbia, Venezuela and Spain. He wished to become a hermit in the United States but the bishop of the region did not support and approve. However, he met Father Boutros Tayyah (later the Maronite Bishop of Mexico). Father Tayyah informed him about the eremitical life in Lebanon and encouraged him to find his vocation there.

In 1990, he travelled to Lebanon to become a monk in the Maronite Lebanese Order. However, being a Latin priest, he had to receive an authorization to adhere to an Order of an Oriental rite. He stayed at the Monastery of Saint Anthony Kozhaya from 25 March 1990 until 28 November 1992, waiting for the permission from Rome to enter the

novitiate. On 28 November 1992 he went to the Monastery of Saints Justine and Cyprian in Kfifan where he completed his novitiate from 14 December 1992 until 14 December 1993. On 17 January 1997, he took his perpetual vows at the monastery of our Lady at Tamiche. On 4 January 1999 he moved to Annaya, staying there until 28 July 1999, then moving to the Monastery of Jennine, in North Lebanon, for almost a year, to prepare to start his hermitage. On 9 July 2000 he returned to the Monastery of Saint Anthony Kozhaya waiting for the authorization to begin his life as a hermit. He entered his hermitage in Hawqa,⁵⁰ on 15 August 2000.⁵¹ This Hawqa is at an altitude of 1200 metres, an hour by foot from the Monastery of Saint Anthony Kozhaya to which it belongs. It was considered by many visitors as ‘the pearl of the Valley’.⁵²

Our Lady of Hawqa is a grotto where a convent was built in the seventeenth century. According to Douwayhi, following the Turcomans conquests the Christians sought refuge in the grottos of the valley. The cavern of Hawqa, which is adjacent to the convent, would have remained inaccessible to the Turcomans had they not been assisted by a Maronite traitor from the region. In diverting the flow of the stream of Saint Simeon, he caused a flood in the grotto, and Maronites hiding there perished. When the Turcomans left the country, the traitor went to the grotto, spending his life there in severe penitence to save his soul. After his death, the inhabitants cut the rock to form a path to it and called the grotto: Our Lady of Hawqa.⁵³ In 1624, thanks to the protection of Emir Fakhreddine, Patriarch Yuhanna Makhoul transformed the grotto into a seminary.⁵⁴ This hermitage was abandoned until the arrival of Father Dario Escobar.

THE LAY MOVEMENT, ‘EREMITICAL DAYS’ IN QANNOUBINE

The contemporary Maronite Church has initiated a unique experience. Maronites, lay and religious, are encouraged to experience the eremitical life.⁵⁵ The idea came about through the influence that Saint Charbel has on contemporary spirituality. The Antonine Sisters invited young men and women of twenty years old and above to live a eremitical experience of twenty-four hours in a hermitage within the Qadisha Valley. Two people or more, of the same sex, were grouped in each hermitage. The twenty-four hours had to be spent in prayer and solitary contemplation. They only took with them the provisions of the hermit provided by the Sisters, including their lunch of bread and water. They slept on the floor. All participants including the nuns followed the programme. Four times a day – eight in the morning, noon, six in the evening and midnight were consecrated to prayer, incense offering, intercession and supplication. At the end of these eremitical twenty-four hours, each participant was invited to share his/her experience with the others, filling in a

questionnaire composed of six themes: Who do you seek during this day in which you are isolated from people and work? How did you spend the hours as a hermit? Have you contemplated the beauty and the silence of nature? Did this setting help you to pray? After having lived the eremitical experience can you show us the way of salvation? Would you live this experience again? This entire programme took place under the supervision of the Antonine Sisters who cleaned the hermitages, planned the programme and wrote the book *Prayer in the Valley of Qadisha*. Each person had to bring with him/her the Bible, prayer books, a pen and a notebook in case he/she wanted to write about his/her contemplation, as well as a torch and a mattress on which to sleep. Each person was allowed to eat wild herbs from the surrounding fields of the hermitage, like the hermits. Upon arrival at the Monastery each participant was informed about the modes of the eremitical life and the history of the Valley and about the programme itself. At the end of the experience each was called to the monastery before going back home. For the nuns, the first objective was that the participants, through their eremitical engagement, would undertake a path in which they personally meet God and would make an effort to support the Church and its believers. The first programme took place from 9 to 16 July 2000. Upon receiving the participants, the sisters accompanied them to the chosen hermitage where they isolated themselves. They only met with the other people in the group when the Church bell rang in the sacred Valley announcing prayer time.

The first 'experience' was undergone by ninety-two participants who reacted positively: Fifty-six were women, of whom thirty-six were single, seventeen were nuns, and three were married. These form 60.8% of the whole group. There were thirty-six men, of whom eleven were single, twenty were seminarians, one was a monk and four were married. At the end of the 'Eremitical Days' the Maronite patriarch Nasrallah Boutros Sfeir celebrated Mass in the presence of participants who were able to testify to their experience in front of the assembly. All the participants showed their willingness to live this experience again and expressed a wish that it would be organized to last a longer period.

In 2001, there were no plans to live the experience again, however, because of repair works carried out at the monastery of Our Lady of Qannoubine. But in 2002, there were sixty-six participants during the two weeks from 19 August until 8 September: fifteen per cent had come for the second time. From 25 July until 31 August 2003 the programme was planned again, this time for forty-eight hours. There were one hundred and twelve candidates.⁵⁶

This movement depends on the physical and historical context of the Maronite eremitical life at Qadisha.⁵⁷ This valley is situated in North Lebanon; it stretches for sixteen kilometres from the foot of the Cedar Mountains to the village of Torza. Being narrow, it snakes its way and widens progressively to take the form of a basin, becoming then a fertile

matrix, which cannot but remind one of maternity. Here, it inspires the masculine presence through this opening to heaven. Lebanon 'is a land of refuge. The deep and steep valleys, the slopes and cirques that are transformed into orchards through hard work, have created a possibility for settlement, and the monastic grottos of Qadisha are a proof to that. The Maronites have maintained what they have received and they have made it bear fruit. Here lies their originality . . .'⁵⁸

MARONITE MONKS IN THE WEST

There is increasing interest in Oriental Christian spirituality in the Western Christian tradition. There are many millions of Maronites who now live outside Lebanon. As a consequence, a greater knowledge and awareness of the Maronite tradition has rooted itself in the Catholic Church. This is an important development in the spiritual currents that feed the Catholic tradition. One example of the Maronite monastic and eremitical tradition taking root is the the Monastery of the Most Holy Trinity of Petersham, Massachusetts. Attracted by Maronite spirituality and especially by the life of Saint Charbel, a group of Latin-rite monks decided to associate themselves with the Maronite tradition. On 8 September 1978, they established an Oriental Catholic monastic community, that of the Maronite Monks of the Most Holy Trinity Monastery or the Maronite Monks of the Adoration. Their establishment was approved canonically by the Holy See on 8 September 1989 and put under the direction of the Maronite diocese of Saint Maron in Brooklyn, New York.⁵⁹

Monks of the Maronite Adoration form a contemplative community, which consecrates all its life to prayer and the Adoration of the Eucharist. It is a contemplative, enclosed community which tries to harmonize and combine the two currents of religious life, coenobitical and eremitical.⁶⁰ They try to live their universal apostolate of service and prayer for the glory of God⁶¹ and live the spirituality of Saint Charbel and Ni'matallah Kassab al Hardini.⁶² The order has two monasteries: the 'mother monastery' called 'The Most Holy Trinity' and a second established in 2000 at Nova Scotia in Canada called 'Our Lady of Grace'. Several hermitages have been built in a serene environment next to the monastery.

CONCLUSION

We have attempted to describe the eremitical life as an expression of Maronite spirituality, which at its core identifies church and community. The eremitical current has recently taken root again within the Maronite

heartlands of Lebanon, in the sacred valley of Qadisha. There has also been a developing interest in the eremitical tradition from laity and religious, a continuing sign of a particular spirituality's witness to the identity of this Oriental Catholic Church. There are also signs that the Maronite tradition is taking root in the West, which does not only have a universal value for the Maronite church but also for Catholicity itself.

Notes

1 Louis Wehbé, 'Le témoignage monastique de l'Église maronite', *Collectanea Cisterciensia*, 28 1966, pp. 88–115.

2 On 5 December 1965, during the closing stages of the Second Vatican Council Pope Paul VI beatified Charbel. He was canonized on 9 October 1977. Thomas Merton, the American Cistercian and hermit, wrote in his journal: 'Charbel lived as a hermit in Lebanon. He was a Maronite. He was dead. Every body forgot him. Fifty years after his death, his body was still intact and in a short period, he performed more than 600 miracles. He is my new companion. My life has witnessed a new turning point. It seems to me that I was asleep for 9 years . . . and before that I was dead' quoted in C. Benedict, *Saint Charbel: Mystic of the East*, 3rd edition, np, 1997, p. XII.

3 For the history of the Maronite Church from its beginnings to modern times, see: P Dib, *Histoire de l'Église Maronite*, Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1962 (translated into English by Seeley J. Beggiani as *The History of the Maronite Church*, 1971). On the life of Saint Maron, see R. M. Price (trs.), *Theodoret of Cyrrhus, A History of the Monks of Syria*, Kalamazoo MI: Cistercian Publications, 1985.

4 A. Festugière, *Antioche païenne et chrétienne, Libanius, Chrysostome et les moines de Syrie*, Paris: Bibliothèque des Écoles Française d'Athènes and Rome, fasc. 194, 1959, p. 229.

5 P. Dib, 'Maronite', *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique*, (DTC), t. X 1928, p. 1.

6 G. Tchalenko, *Villages antiques de la Syrie du Nord*, Bibliothèque archéologiques et historiques de l'Institut des Archéologie de Beyrouth, Vol. L, 1958, p. 229.

7 I. Dalmais, 'L'hérmitage Antiochen de l'Église maronite', *Melto* 3, 1967, p. 61.

8 P. Boutous-Daou, 'Le site du couvent principal de S. Maron en Syrie', *Parole de l'Orient* (PO), Vol. 3, 1972, pp. 145–152; Jean Gribomont, 'Documents sur les origines de l'Église maronite', *PO*, Vol. 5, 1974, pp. 95–132; Herald Suermann, 'Die lage des klosters Mar Maron', *PO*, Vol. 13, 1986, pp. 197–223.

9 Seeley J. Beggiani, *Early Syriac Theology, with Special Reference to the Maronite Tradition*, Lanham MD, University of America Press, 1983; 'The Typological Approach of Syriac Sacramental Theology', *Theological Studies*, 64 2003, pp. 543–557.

10 M. Hayek, 'Maronite (Eglise)', *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, t. X 1978, pp. 631–44.

11 I. Dalmais and A. Guillaumont, 'Syriaque (Spiritualité): les premiers siècles', *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, XIV, Paris, 1990, col. 1440.

12 Dalmais, 'L'hérmitage Antiochen de l'Église maronite', pp. 65–6.

13 Hayek, 'Maronite (Eglise)', *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, col. 639.

14 M. Hayek, 'L'Église Maronite et la terre', The Second World Maronite conference, New York, October 1980, n.p.

15 Rudolf Hiestand, 'Die integration der Maroniten in die Römische Kirche: zum ältesten zeugnis der Päpstlichen kanzlei (12 Jahrhundert)', *Orientalia Christiana Periodica*, Vol. 54, 1988, pp. 119–152.

16 G. Sacre, 'L'Office de la Fête de la Croix dans la Liturgie Marointe', *PO* 12, 1984/5, p. 232. R. Abi Nader, 'The Exultation of the Glorious Cross September Fourteen', *Journal of Maronite Studies* (JMS) [<http://www.mari.org/JMS/july 97/index.html>], vol. 1, no. 3 (July 1997), retrieved 15 September 2003.

17 Sh. Abou Zayd, *Ihidayutha: A Study of the life of Singleness in the Syrian Orient: From Ignatius of Antioch to Chalcedon 451 A.D.*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 303.

18 *Theodor of Cyrrhus, A History of the Monks of Syria*, pp. 117–9.

- 19 B. Naaman, *La maronite théologie et vie: des montagnes de Cyr aux plaines de l'Apamène*, Kaslik, Bibliothèque de l'Université Saint-Esprit, 1971.
- 20 B. Sfeir, *Les Ermites dans l'Église Maronite*, Kaslik, 1986, pp. 112–3.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 114.
- 22 *Ibid.*
- 23 Vatican Library, Syriac Collection (hereafter Vat. Syr.) 215, fol. 24^v.
- 24 *Ibid.*, fol. 53^v.
- 25 *Ibid.*, fol. 102^v.
- 26 *Ibid.*, fol. 111^v.
- 27 *Ibid.*, fol. 114^v.
- 28 *Ibid.*, fol. 128^v.
- 29 *Ibid.*, fol. 141^v.
- 30 Hayek, Maronite (Église), *DTC*, col. 639.
- 31 G. Mahfoud, 'La vie érémitique dans l'Église maronite', *Melto* 2, 1966, pp. 172–3; Sfeir, *Les Ermites dans l'Église Maronite*, pp. 144–71.
- 32 Hayek, 'Hayek, Maronite (Eglise)', *DTC*, col. 639.
- 33 Interview with the former Superior General of the Antonine Order, Sister Clémence Helou, Monastery of Our Lady of Deliverance, 'Ain' Alaq 18 August, 2003.
- 34 Hayek, Maronite (Église), *DTC*, col. 639.
- 35 Abou Zayd, *Ihdayutha: A Study of the life of Singleness in the Syrian Orient*, p. 101; J.-M. Fiey, 'Cénobitisme féminine ancien dans les Églises syrienne orientale et occidentale', *L'Orient Syrien*, 10 1965, pp. 281–306.
- 36 L. Dagher, *Kashf Al Khafa' An Mahabis Lubnan Wa Al-Hubasa'* ('A historical survey on the life of hermits and hermitages in Lebanon'), Beirut, 1923, 2nd edition, 1988, pp. 144–6.
- 37 P. Sfeir et G. Hourani, 'The Maronite Hermits: From the Fourth to the Twentieth Century', *Journal of Maronite Studies* (JMS), [http://www.mari.org/JMS/October99/The_Maronite_Hermits.htm], vol. 3, no. 4 (October 1999), retrieved 30 July 2003.
- 38 Dagher, *Kashf Al-Khafa*, pp. 65–69. Amba or Saint Boula is also known as the anchorite Paul of Thebes. He was an Egyptian who around 250 AD withdrew to the desert because of the persecution. He led in the desert a life of prayer and asceticism and died in 343 AD. His feast day in the Maronite Church is 5 February. B. Dagher, *Al Sinkṣār Al Mārūnī Bi Hasab Al Kanīsa Al In. Takīyya Al Mārūnīyya* ('The synaxary according to the Rite of the Maronite Antiochian Church'), Lebanon, 1962, p. 11.
- 39 The information about the hermit Chayna was given to us by the abbot of the Monastery of Saint Anthony of Kozhaya, Reverend Father Youssef Tannous.
- 40 A village in Northern Lebanon where the Monastery of Saints Justin and Cyprian is located as well as the tomb of Saint Ni'matallah Kassab al Hardini.
- 41 A. Mokbel, *Dayr Mār An. Tūnyūs. Kuzhayyā* (The monastery of Saint Anthony Kozhaya), Lebanon, 2000, pp. 49–53.
- 42 The information about the hermit Mary-Jesus was given to us by Reverend Father Elie Hanna, Rector of the Holy Spirit University in Chekka on 20 September 2003. He is currently writing the history of the Monastery of Saint Simeon Stylites in Ayto.
- 43 She was canonized on 10 June 2001. E. Hanna, *Sainte Rafqa: Moniale Libanaise Maronite, 1832–1914*, Lebanon, 2001; P. Saadé, *Retraite avec Sainte Rafqa*, Lebanon, 2001; and P. Sfeir, *Saint Rafqa The Lebanese Nun: Her life and Spirituality*, translated Kozhaya Akiki, Lebanon, 2001.
- 44 Interview with Fr Elie Hanna (2003).
- 45 *Ibid.*
- 46 The information about hermit Khawand was given to us by the Pontifical Faculty of the Holy Spirit University in Kaslik, by the secretariat of the Maronite Lebanese Order and by Rev. Joseph Azzi, professor at the Pontifical Faculty of Theology of the Holy Spirit University in Kaslik.
- 47 L. Bleibel, *Tarikh Al Rahbaniyya Al Lubnaniyya Al Maruniyya* (History of the Maronite Lebanese Order), t. I, Egypt, 1924, pp. 133–4.
- 48 M. Karam, *Kisat Al_Mulkīyya Fi Al_Rahbaniyya Al_Lubnaniyya Al_Maruniyya*, Beirut, 1972, p. 221.
- 49 Information provided by the monastery of Tamiche.
- 50 Hawqa is a Syriac word which means levels, stairs. Sfeir, *Les ermites*, p. 51.
- 51 The information about hermit Escobar was given to us by the Abbot of the Monastery of Saint Anthony Kozhaya, Reverend Father Youssef Tannous.

52 *Lā'i. ha Bi Al_Istikshāfāt Wa Al_Iktishāfāt Allati. Kāmāt Bihā Al_Djam'Iyya Al Lubnāniyya Lil Ab.hāth Al_Djawfiyya Fi Minita.ta.Kat Wādī.Kādishā* ('List of the sites explored and discovered by the Group of Studies and Subterranean Research of Lebanon in the Valley of Qadisha'), *Liban Souterrain* V, March 1998, note 12, p. 314.

53 Vat. Syr. 215, fol. 66.

54 Ibid.

55 His Beatitude Patriarch Mar Nasrallah Sfeir requested that the Antonine Sisters be present in the Monastery of Our Lady of Qannoubine. This Monastery was the patriarchal residence between 1450 and 1823 but it was abandoned after the patriarchal residence was moved to Diman and then to Bkerke. Since then the sisters are present there every year between May and October.

56 The information about the eremitical days is provided by the former Superior General of the Antonine Sisters, Sister Dominique Halabi, at the Monastery of Our Lady of Qannoubine, 4 August 2003. Sister Halabi played a major role in planning the programme and the initiation of the 'Eremitical Days'. In 2000 she was herself the coordinator of this programme.

57 For a description of the Qadisha valley written in the 14th century, see cf. J. Mislím, *Les saints lieux, Pèlerinage à Jérusalem, en passant par l'Autriche, la Hongrie, la Slavonie, les provinces danubiennes, Constantinople, l'Archipel, le Liban, la Syrie, Alexandrie, Malte, la Sicile et Marseille*, 3 vols, Brussels, 1852.

58 Dalmais, 'The Antiochian Heritage', pp. 65–6.

59 The Maronite Monks of Most Holy Trinity Monastery of Petersham Massachusetts, official Internet site of the Monastery, [<http://www.maronitemonks.org/Introduction.htm>], retrieved 29 July 2003.

60 Ibid.

61 Ibid.

62 Ibid. Ni'matallah Kassab al Hardini, called Joseph, Son of Gerges Kassab from Hardin, was born in 1810. He pursued his studies in Houb_Tannourine. On 1 November 1828 he entered the Novitiate of the Maronite Lebanese Order at the Monastery of Saint Anthony Kozhaya. He took perpetual vows on 14 November 1830. From 1830 until 1835 he pursued studies in philosophy and theology at the monastery of Kfifan. He was ordained priest on 25 December 1835. He assumed several functions within his Order. However, after having contracted pleurisy, he died in 1858. He was buried in Kfifan, beatified at the Vatican on 10 May 1998. M. Karam, *Ni'mat Alla Kassab Al_Hardini: Kiddis Kfifan 1810–1858 (Ni'mat Alla Kassab Al_Hardini: The Saint of Kfifan 1810–1858)*, Lebanon, 1998, pp. 5–19; P. Azzi, *Blessed Nimatullah Kassab Al Hardini Master of Spirituality*, Rome, 1998, and J. Mahfouz, *The Servant of God Father Nimatullah Kassab al Hardini*, Rome, 1980.